Africa: Cultural Dilemma
Fargo-Moorhead Communiversity

Session III, February 20, 1994

I. Nigeria as the Paradigm for the Cultural Dilemma of West Africa -- Why?

The original intellectual leadership of Sub- Sahara Africa came from the French-speaking Africans: Senghor and the issue of "Negritude." That is, "Who are we as Black intellectuals in a White-dominated world?" and "What is our social and political responsibility to our people?" The first question dominated the discussion, although the second never disappeared from the agenda. (W.E.B.DuBois)

With the coming of independence, the emphasis shifted to the second question: "What is our social and political responsibility?" "Negritude' largely disappeared from the agenda, although I suspect that in America, the first question is very much alive.

The center of the discussion moved from French-speaking Africa to English-speaking Africa, and especially to Nigeria. There are historical reasons for this.

Nigeria was the African "jewel in the (British) crown." It was resource-rich and intellectually-vibrant in a way that other British African colonies were not. This may have been something peculiar to Igbo and Yoruba culture. The Hausa and Fulani Moslem Emirates of Northern Nigeria were especially hospitable to the British for different reasons: the military and the Moslem organization of the culture. These were things which the British understood.

Britain cultivated Nigeria especially post-World War II, when independence became inevitable and Britain wanted to keep Nigeria as a part of the Commonwealth -- at almost any cost. This goes a long way toward explaining the role of Britain in the Nigeria-Biafra civil war.

Prepared as a model for African independence: a vigorous black press for 100 years. An older generation of journalists. A legal profession. At the same time, a remarkable durability of traditional culture.

Population: One out of five Africans is Nigerian.

A Gross National Product greater than South Africa's. Sixth largest exporter of crude oil -- half of which comes to the U.S. Income badly distributed. A chaotic economy.

More than 2 million university-trained professionals. (This is a problem in itself!) The very vitality and competitiveness becomes a source of trouble.

Political corruption, which, since 1960, has led to 6 bloody military coups and a devastating civil war. (I lived through two of those coups and part of the civil war. The reported 1 million casualties, don't count the deaths in the months preceding the war itself.)

Crime, which feeds on economic distress and uneven distribution of wealth.

Chinua Achebe: "Nigeria is not a great country. It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun. It is one of the most expensive countries and one of those that give the least value for money. It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar. In short, it is one of the most unpleasant places on earth."

Like everything else about Nigeria, its problems are larger than life. It is the most visible example of the African Dilemma, and it is the arena in which the future is likely to be worked out as a model for the rest of the continent.

II. The Achebe novels:

They make a coherent history of the emergence of Nigeria.

Things Fall Apart : The first impact of the encounter with the Europeans. The break in the coherence of Igbo society. The first conflict of values and view of ethical priorities.

No Longer at Ease: The modern impact of the value-conflict. There is a clear logical sequence of the two titles, and a similar origin: The poem of T.S. Eliot.

Arrow of God: Fills in the gap between the first two. The moral dilemma of the Igbo village leaders.

A Man of the People : The political evolution of independent Nigeria. The politics of nepotism and corruption.

The Ant-hills of the Savannah : The tragedy of corrupting power. The succession of military coups. A fictional "Kangan" but it is Nigeria only thinly disguised. Very courageous for a Nigerian.

III. No Longer at Ease

What is the audience for Achebe ?

African (Does not explain his allusions for a non-African audience. Uses Igbo language and "WesCos" pidgin. Proverbs.)
Literate, Educated, sophisticated.
A pretty small audience!

Obi Okonkwo - Who is he?

He is a product of the village culture who has rejected both traditional values and the values of his Christian family in favor of an abstract rational and "academic" ethical structure. When disaster strikes, he has nowhere to turn.

The detached intellectual: He read English in University, not Law. This is the Audience!

Clara and the "Osu" (Achebe describes the "Osu" system.)
The temptations and imperatives of "Senior Service" urban life:
The car (and auto insurance!) The necessity of "keeping up appearances."
His house-boy, Sebastian. A driver for his car. "I go drive myself."
These are contributions to the economy. A source of employment.
The monetary claims of family and village.

Umuofia - The village with its corresponding "Umuofia Progressive Society."

Sponsoring students -- withe the expectation of return on the investment.

Obi becomes a criminal by tragic accident. He is expected to take bribes. It is a part of the system. It is "off-the book" compensation. He refuses to give bribes and he refuses to take them. When he is in dire straits, he takes the bribe almost by accident, and he does it sloppily.

The Hon. Sam Okoli: Prototype of the politician. Village admiration of "the Big Man." This is played out in A Man of the People, published in 1967, in the very month of the "first coup."

Certainly "on the take." The political dilemma: Bribery, corruption and nepotism are the accusations against the politicians. They are what leads to military coups. Still, they are embedded in "the system."

Mr. Green: The professional British expatriate. He loved Nigeria, but "the Nigeria of his steward-boy." A kind of nostalgia for colonial days. (I had to guard myself against this one. The expatriate life was a pleasant life. It no longer exists.)

Christopher : The economist, London School of Economics. Able to slip easily between "good" and "broken" English. "Especially on Saturday night, Christopher was rather exceptional. I suspect that "Christopher" is someone Achebe knows. Another Christopher with the same credentials appears in The Ant-hills of the Savannah, written 20 years later.

IV. Some interesting allusions:

"You own the yam and you own the knife." We are in your power.

Injections for soldiers.

"Ugwu" - Mountain, or "Ugwu" - Circumcision.

Running over a dog or a duck.

Unmask and ancestral spirit.

V. Summary:

Can we put together for ourselves a statement of the Cultural Dilemma as Achebe conveys it in the novel? Again, the audience and its importance.